THE RIVER AND THE BOAT *A sermon by Adept Paskhál, delivered at the shore of the Caldera Lake, during the evacuation fires. Transcribed.*

[Sound of people settling. Water nearby. Distant crackling.]
Alright. Alright, I can see you're — some of you are still wet. Some of you lost things tonight. I know. I *know*. And I'm not going to pretend this is a normal Wednesday.
[Pause.]
But I have seven things to say to you. Seven. And I am going to say all seven of them tonight because — because I have been carrying these seven things for a long time and I am tired of carrying them alone and this seems like as good a night as any.
[He clears his throat.]
You hear people say: God is within us. Creator, Parent, the — the deep thing in the deep place. You hear that. I've said it myself. And maybe it's true. Maybe there's more than one of them in there. An old one, ancient, who doesn't — who has kind of let go of the family resemblance. A newer one, almost familiar, still — still indifferent. Maybe more beyond that. Older still.
What goes on between them, if anything goes on, if they're even there — I genuinely, *genuinely* do not know. I can only suppose. And I preach from supposition. Because I believe.
But that is not what I want to talk to you about tonight. You'll forgive me. I want to talk to you about what I *know*.
[Beat.]
Listen to me. Give an old man a minute.

The First Thing.
[He holds up a finger.]
Do what you want.
Or — be yourself.
Choose one.
[Pause. He looks out.]
No, I'm — I'm serious. I wish I was setting up a joke. I am not setting up a joke. This is the choice. This is the actual, honest, ungraceful, ugly choice that is in front of every single person in this — in this gathering tonight.
You want to do what you want? You will not remain yourself. The doing — the constant doing of what you want — it changes you. Erodes you. Shapes you around the wanting until there isn't a you left to do the wanting. You follow me?

You want to *remain yourself* — hold onto who you are, your selfhood, the core — then your will is going to have to take a backseat. Going to have to. It will not be comfortable.
[He starts to pace.]
There's two paths. Only two. You can seek. Create. Push into new things. Build something nobody built before. And then — and you need to hear this part — and then *die by the hand of the very thing you built*. That's path one. The river takes you and you make something glorious and it destroys you and someone else uses the wreckage.
Or. *Or.* You cling. You hold fast to the ancient and the given. Like ants in an anthill. And that works! That works, I want to be honest with you, it works — but you need to know what you're signing up for. You're a worker or you're a soldier. Those are the options. No free will in the anthill. The queen isn't even — the queen's situation is not one I would wish on anyone, so don't go thinking the queen has it figured out.
That's it. Those are the two paths.
I know. I know. It's terrible. It is a deeply unsatisfying set of options and I have prayed many times to be shown a third one and I have not been shown a third one. I share this with you not to depress you but because —
[He stops.]
— because deception is expensive. We believe deception is expensive. And I will not give you the comfort of a lie tonight.

The Second Thing.
We live on a river.
We have always — *always* — lived on a river. All of us. Every civilization you have heard of, the great kingdoms, the — look, think about it. Think about where people built things. You know what they built along? Rivers. Warm coasts. You look at those ancient civilizations, those enormous kingdoms, and you know what they actually were? Threads. They were *threads* along the water. The depth of their lands was nothing compared to how far they stretched along a river's edge. They walked a tightrope and called it an empire.
Life is a river.
Fast. Almost everywhere fast. Mountains in some places. A slow bend, a wide still stretch — that is *rare*. That is the exception. We are in a small boat — no sail, no oarsmen — we have a couple of unreliable little anchors and a rudder that I would describe as *aspirational*.

[Some laughter.]
And here is the thing about this river. Here is the thing that nobody tells you in school. You do not need to *effort* your way toward improvement. The river does that. The river *does that*. It pushes you. It shoves you from behind. Progress, development, growth — these are not achievements, beloved, they are the *current*. You think you chose to develop? The river chose for you. The hunger chose for you. You ran out of food — there is your motivation, there is your startup energy, there is your entire innovation ecosystem right there. Necessity. Need. *Need need need*.
The river doesn't care about your five-year plan. The river has its own agenda and you are — you are a very small boat.

The Third Thing.
[He holds up three fingers.]
This one is counterintuitive. Stay with me.
The only thing that *requires effort* — real effort, costly effort — is blocking the river. Stopping development. *That* is where the energy goes. Not forward. Backward. Dams are expensive. And a selective dam — where you let some things through and hold other things back — that is the most expensive construction in the universe, because then *everyone can see what you're doing*. When some things move and other things don't, the difference is visible. The processing is obvious. The interference is revealed.
Now if you block everything uniformly — give nothing room to breathe, nothing room to grow — maybe you succeed for a while. Maybe a long while, even. But only by your own reckoning of time. Your children will hit the boulder when the anchor rope rots. And it will rot. It always rots.
So. Don't be too impressed with yourself. Don't think too highly of your ability to manage the river. The dangerous ones — *the dangerous ones* — are the ones who believe they are managing it from a spiritual position. Who believe their blockage is holy. Those are the most dangerous people you will ever meet, and you will meet them, and I am telling you now: do not follow them.
Do not follow them.

The Fourth Thing.
[He pauses. Takes some water.]
You are going to crash.
[Pause.]
Not might. Not possibly. *Are going to*.

You can drag your anchors. You can tighten your belt. You can refuse to invent, refuse to change. You can go with the current and steer carefully, avoiding rocks. It doesn't matter. You will hit one. War. Famine. Fire — [he gestures at the burning behind them] — *fire*. Some disaster, some breaking, some shattering of the small vessel you built your life inside.
And I am here to tell you — do *not* spend your life trying to avoid it. Because you cannot avoid it, and the trying will destroy you before the crash does. You will wreck yourself anticipating the wreck.
When the boat breaks: build a new one. From driftwood. From whatever washes up. Maybe — maybe you take materials from someone else's wreck. I'm not going to pretend that doesn't happen. It happens.
But you cannot *not* sail. There is no shore for us. If there is a shore, someone will push you off it because they want the peace you have. Peace is not long. Peace was never long.
You are on the water. Steer. Use your anchors wisely. And when you crash — and you will crash — know that the crashing is not punishment. It is the river being honest with you.

The Fifth Thing.
[Quietly now.]
You do not know if your motives are yours.
This is — this troubles me more than almost anything else I carry. You think you want something. You think you chose this. But is that wanting coming from *you*? Or is it coming from the people inside you who are not quite you? The circumstances you've been soaking in so long you can't tell their influence from your own instinct?
The river of progress — and I say this with love for the river, I am not anti-river, I live on the river like everyone else — the river gives you the feeling of freedom. Freedom from your neighbors. Freedom from the past. But it takes your *will*. It carries you where it carries you and you feel free because you're moving, not because you chose the direction.
[Beat.]
Now. There are Guardians.
There are always Guardians. They arise in every field, every domain of knowledge. They grow. They accumulate. They become the thing that owns the domain. And then — *predictably* — they collapse. They always collapse. And they set everything back, sometimes for generations, sometimes longer. This is not a catastrophe. This is the river breathing. Slow. Like a snake that needs rough ground to move.

But here is what you must understand about the Guardian. By the time someone becomes a Guardian — by the time they sit at the center of the thing they've spent their life building — they believe the lie they're protecting. Because the entry cost was so high. You cannot spend thirty years becoming the gatekeeper of a thing and then maintain clear eyes about whether the thing deserves a gatekeeper. You cannot. Nobody can.
And your spark — *your spark* — will go out. I'm sorry. It will. Maybe later than you think, maybe earlier. But it will cool, and when it cools, you will become a Guardian of what you loved, and you will begin to block the very development you once lived for. This is not evil. This is *biology*. This is the river using you as a dam after it's done using you as a boat.
Beware of that moment. More than any other moment. Beware the day you stop being curious and start being *careful*.

The Sixth Thing.
[He moves closer to the front of the gathering.]
When you create something — when you build it, when you bring it into being — do not let it stay *outside* you.
Eat it.
I mean this. Whatever new thing you make, whatever awakens in you or jumps onto your boat from the bank — you have to swallow it. Incorporate it. Put it to work inside you the way the microorganisms in your gut work, quietly, without recognition, without asking what they get in return. They are *in* you. They are *of* you. They are not separate from you.
If you need to get bigger to do this — then get bigger. Expand your boundaries. Grow your capacity. But do not let the thing you created stand outside you and look at you. That is how you lose yourself to your own creation. That is how the thing you made becomes the thing that unmakes you.
Eat it. Always. Every time.

The Seventh Thing.
[Long pause. He looks at someone in the front. His voice softens.]
To grow — to really grow, to expand without *bursting*, because the shell is thin, the shell has always been thin — you must press close to your own kind.
Body to body.
[Pause.]
Now. I know what that costs. I know what is being asked. When you

press that close to the people who are truly your own — not your assigned group, not your demographic, not your — your *category*, but the actual people who are built like you, who move like you, who hear the river the way you hear it — when you join that closely, you stop being able to go everywhere you wanted. Do everything you wanted. Live exactly as you imagined.
That is real. That is a real loss and I will not minimize it.
You become something like a hive. You receive assignments. You give up a kind of freedom.
But.
[He raises one finger.]
Did you keep your selfhood?
You kept your selfhood.
And I ask you: what did you think the alternative was? You thought you could grow indefinitely alone? You thought the shell would hold? It wouldn't. You'd burst. And there would be nothing left. Not even the memory of what you were trying to protect.
[His voice drops to almost nothing.]
I am — I am happy, by the way. I want to say that. This is — this is not a sad sermon. I know it sounds like a sad sermon. But I am genuinely happy. Not blessed. Not elevated above the fray. Not touched by the divine in any — in any ceremonial sense.
Just *happy*.
And it has nothing to do with how things are going.
[Pause.]
Because I am here. I am on the river. I am in the boat. I can feel the current. I can feel the people beside me. I can feel —
[He stops. He seems surprised by what he's feeling.]
I can feel the breath moving between us right now.
That's it. That is the whole of it.

[His voice rises again, building.]
One more thing. One more thing I want to leave you with before we — before we figure out what tonight means for the morning.
There is a name. A name for the thing we are inside of. The thing that carries us and does not care and cannot help but receive us. That breathes slowly, over centuries, in and out, and each exhale is an empire and each inhale is a dark age and it has been doing this since before there was a language to describe it doing this.
That name —
[The crowd begins, quietly at first:]
A-Ver.

A-Ver.
[Building.]
Avertigus.
[He does not shout it. He lets the crowd carry it.]
Go. Build your boats from what's left. Press close to your own. Eat what you make.
And breathe.
Breathe together.
[Distant fire. Water. The sound of the crowd dispersing slowly into the dark.]